Matthew 4:1-11 - The Supreme Temptation

From out of obscurity came a Jewish carpenter to be baptised by John. As he entered the river a dramatic incident occurred; there was a dove, the heavens opened and a voice said ("This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.") In this manner Jesus of Nazareth began his ministry as the Christ, the annointed one of the Lord. It was both a call from God and a coronation, surely a time for jubilation and celebrating. What followed, however, is one of the most profound incidents recorded in the gospel narrative.

Jesus retired to a lonely spot in the wilderness for forty days. It was a great thing that had happened to him, a tremendous responsibility that had been lain upon his shoulders. There could be no doubt, he had a mission to accomplish and it would require his all to perform it. And so for forty days and nights he thought, and reasoned; questioned and doubted—and when it was over he was ready, prepared and determined to carry out his assigned task.

Every father knows that there comes a time in his son's life when the son must go it alone, must face life's alternatives and make a decision. In this way only does a boy reach the maturity of manhood. This is precisely the experience that Jesus here encountered. He was a man with a job to do: there were many different ways of going about that job: he had to sit and think, to eliminate the inferior ways and to finally make his decision.

The forty days in the wilderness has been called the period of temptation — and a trying forty days it was. As he pondered his mission, the power that was his, our Lord, was truly tempted to choose different means with which to accomplish his goal. For him it was like a fork in the road, he must go one

way or the other, he had to make a decision. It was a chance for success or failure, one road was the way of truth, the other was not.

The doubts and temptations that beset him were very normal, personal and human phenomena. They appealed to those desires which are supreme in the hearts of men--the desire for material comfort, the desire for popularity, and the desire for power and influence. These are not strange desires, they are present in the hearts of each one of us--and the temptations that inflame them plague us day after day. As a matter of fact the man who is comfortable, popular and influential has become the model for our culture. So we need not think that Jesus' temptations were unique and occurred only to him; worded slightly differently they apply to our situation; and we do well to observe the reaction they prompted in our Lord.

To this we will return, but for the moment let us look at the meaning and significance this story sheds on the word temptation. We often think that if we are good, if we truly try to be Christians somehow we will be immune from temptation. We think that if our faith is strong enough we will not question or doubt. For some, questioning and doubting have become the marks of weak faith. Christianity has become blind, unthinking acceptance, there is no place for the temptation to ask questions, to think and to reason. To these, the story of Jesus' forty days of temptations speaks loudly. Our Lord himself, before he could fully perform his task, had to face temptations. Doubt, and questioning were a necessity, they were the necessary steps of preparation on the way to his goal.

No good cause, no truth is available unless first there is doubt and question. Religion that refuses to face the temptations to doubt and questin

cannot be called Faith. This story, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, demonstrates finally that doubt is an integral part of faith.

In the wilderness Jesus pondered one thing--his task and how best to go about it. He must decide the right way, the most effective way to serve his father. Food was scarce in Palestine; in a land where only 1/5 of the countryside was arable bread was precious indeed. Jesus knew the misery of the peasantry, he knew how often they went to bed with no bread at all. By using his power to miraculously turn rocks into loaves of bread he could feed the Palentines' hungry multitudes while at the same time drawing attention to himself and his gospel. But, "Man shall not live by bread alone." He was tempted, it seemed like a good idea, but something important was missing, it wasn't the right way.

Perhaps the best way would be for him to start an insurrection against the government. Palestine and many other Roman Provinces were seething cauldrons of hatred and resent. Together, under common leadership they could probably overthrow Tiberius Caesar. It would be effective all aright--the whole world would know the name Jesus, crowds would shout their praises to the liberator and emancipator. Certainly in this position he could faithfully carry out his Father's will. And yet here too something was missing. It was a good cause and Jesus was tempted by it, but it was not the true way either.

A little less extreme is the temptation to popularity. There would be no miraculous creation of food, no revolution and bloodshed, just a startling feat--like jumping down off the high pinnacle of the temple. He could imagine

the crowd that would quickly gather below, pointing and murmuring, speculating whether he would jump or not. And when he did throw himself in their midst and get up unharmed they would know that the power of God was with him. The word would spread quickly, his fame would extend throughout the land. Surely he could better serve his father after he had made his name mean something. After all, the people were lethargic--they needed to be wakened up, to be startled into belief.

And yet there was something here that caused Jesus to refuse it. The temptation was great, it was not a difficult or complicated thing to do, and what is more it was a good cause he was thinking about. Did it really matter which way he went about it, so long as he accomplished it? What did it matter? If the people heard the Gospel all else was unimportant! It is a question of ends and means: do worthy ends justify any means? In his answers Jesus said not--that the means are just as important as the ends; that a worthy goal does not open the field to any alternative so long as the goal is achieved.

What is the danger here? we ask. Isn't it most important that the ends be accomplished? Wasn't the important thing that Jesus spread the word regardless of the way he chose to do it? The danger here is subtle and hidden and perhaps invisible to most of us.

When so much emphasis is put on getting something done, the significance of the means, and the way we do it, easily becomes enlarged and exaggerated. Many a good cause has been lost or dirtied by the way in which it was accomplished. Many a worthy cause has been forgotten when men become so enfatuated

with the means by which it is carried out.

Jesus saw this subtle danger, he knew that if he made himself popular by performing a miraculous feat that people would be so interested in him they would neglect to look beyond to his gospel. His goal would be lost amid the attention he had won--the ends did not justify the means.

Pa. → History is full of incidents where men have taken up a splendid idea, a worthy cause, but who somewhere along the line have either forgotten or destroyed the truth and goodness of the original idea by the way they were carrying it out.

In the 12th century the church decided to purify the gospel by ridding itself of ~~heretics~~ heresy. The original idea was a true and noble one--to preserve the historic faith, to rid the gospel of Jesus Christ of perversion. Who would question the validity of this idea and this goal? But in a very few years the Spanish Inquisition had become a tool of the state, it operated by subversion and lying, it's methods were cruel and barbarian; its toll was thousands burned at the stake and countless others deformed and tortured. It was unintentional, the goal was a good one but the means became so hideous that the goal was quickly forgotten.

In the late twenties and the early thirties a defeated, disgusted and poverty stricken German nation gave ear to a rising young politician. His promises were music to their ears; he promised to restore their land to its proper rank as a leader among nations, he promised to restore the country's economy to a sound basis., he promised jobs to hundreds of thousands of unemployed laborers. He promised security and happiness, pride and prestige.

His goals were noble, his aims struck a spirit of nationalism in every German. His promises were so sweet that an entire nation was willing to turn its head as he went about accomplishing those aims. He was crude at times, his party had shown signs of brutality--but what did that matter if he fulfilled his promises? For those ends, any means would be justified. And from those means came Adolf Hitler, from his manner of doing things came the nightmare of the Nazi era. The sweetness of his early promises had disappeared in a few short years, his goals were long forgotten in the midst of the barbarianism he ignited. History shows that the ends, no matter how noble, do not justify any means.

We do not have to go back eight centuries in history or across the ocean to find an illustration of the problem Jesus encountered in his wilderness temptation. The issue of ends and means is present in our own nation. It involves a moral question of the same degree Jesus faced and in resolving it in our own lives we may gain help from his decision. In the past few months much has been said about the movement to rid our society of all subversive characters. The movement has for its aims, goals that are of the highest and most honorable nature. Few Americans would hesitate to agree that our liberties are precious, that they deserve defending and preserving. No one would argue that freedom is a wonderful thing and that it ought to be protected. These are the goals, or the ends, of the movement; there is no doubt that the goals are noble and ~~honorable~~ good.

The movement is very similar to that surrounding the late Senator McCarthy, a man whose life was dedicated to defending the nation he loved and to preserving the freedom he held dear.

pause

But do these goals, even these goals, justify a campaign of slander and libel? Do these goals justify a barrage of unfounded, unproven and totally irresponsible name calling? Do these high and mighty goals rectify any verbal attack on any one—even if it is an ex President, or a late Secretary of State, or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

Do these goals validate causing a man to lose his job, his friends and social status merely because his brother-in-law's best friend attended a leftist political rally in 1936? Do these goals justify firing a widow secretary from the State Department because her husband long ago was temporarily interested in socialism?

These are the tactics, the means, that have grown out of the goal of defending our nation. They present a question of ethics or morals; the question of ends and means that was faced, struggled with, and answered by Jesus Christ.

The ends, even if they be the most noble the human mind conceives, never justify any odd means. Perhaps Jesus would have been a more influential preacher had he embarked on his ministry by miraculously jumping from the temple. /But he did not./ He realized that these means would quickly grow out of proportion and overshadow his real goal. Men would fail to see and hear the Word of God in their curious faith in a man who had jumped from the temple.

He faced this temptation, and an attractive one it was, and refused it. Instead he chose the hard way, the way of truth—the way of love and suffering. /The means he chose did not overshadow his goal--but enriched it.

He chose means that grew out of his goal. We have seen that his choice was an accurate one.

The temptation to let means overshadow ends is present in the lives of every one of us; the story of Jesus in the wilderness speaks directly to us. It is not just an academic question to be debated in text books and classroom. When the end is lost in the means, when noble causes deteriorate amidst unethical practices it becomes a personal, religious question.

Most of us are not involved in the causes I have mentioned as illustrations. But everyone of us has some cause, some ultimate goal to which we are devoted. It may be the efficient operation of the P.T.A., it could be the success of a local fund raising campaign, it could be the effective ministry of the Dyer Union Church, it may be the creation and maintenance of a home and family.

Regardless of the specific goals, we are called upon to examine the way in which we are going about the achievement of that goal. Have we lost sight of it, have we succumbed to the temptation to let the means become our ultimate concern? Have we chosen an easy way that appears on the surface to be right and effective?

It is not an easy question, and there is no ready answer for anyone. We can, however, consider the decisiveness of our Lord. For his cause, the means could not be allowed to destroy the ends. For him the means of his ministry were so closely tied to his goal that no conflict arose. He chose the difficult path, there was no easy way.

Our prayer must be that we, like him, will have the strength to turn our backs on the wrong way and to choose the right, no matter how difficult;-- that we, like him, might have the power to resist this--the Supreme Temptation.